

Restrictions and reality help cut teen drinking

While police and other officials move to dry up the flow of alcohol to teenagers, campuses persuade students to cut consumption on their own.

By H.J. Cummins
Star Tribune Staff Writer

The trick is to see teen drinking as a supply-and-demand issue.

If you do, advocates of two new anti-drinking efforts say, you'll see some promising results.

Those tackling the supply side are cracking down on the flow of alcohol to young people. "It's simply true that young people drink less when it's harder to get," said Cheryl Perry, a University of Minnesota professor whose research projects include crackdown efforts in northern Minnesota cities.

And those working on the demand side are finding success with a kind of "reality check," which tells youngsters that when it comes to drinking — contrary to popular opinion — not "everybody is doing it."

Making it harder to get

"The single most visible thing we can do is make sure our businesses don't sell alcohol to minors," Plymouth Police Chief Craig Gerdes said. He is a driving force behind the city's decision to toughen its supply-side approach to enforcement.

Plymouth now does stings, or "compliance checks," on every licensed liquor establishment in the city at least twice a

year. And the City Council is tough on violators: First-time offenders have seen penalties as high as \$1,000 and a 10-day suspension of their liquor licenses.

There is a kinder, gentler side to all this enforcement, though. As he does each year, Gerdes next week will send high school seniors what he calls his "congratulations-be-careful letter," in which he asks them to celebrate graduation responsibly. He spends hours signing all the letters; it's an issue close to his heart.

Gerdes still tears up recounting the time he had to identify the body of a dear friend, killed by a drunken driver.

"And I've held the hand of young people as they've died" after drunken-driving accidents, he said. "I'll be happy if my letters cause even one young person to think twice before doing something irresponsible, if even one tragedy is avoided."

Minneapolis also is doing more stings, and city health officials say it's making a difference: Two rounds of checks last year showed sale rates to minors cut in half.

The benefits of all this enforcement are many, according to Traci Toomey, a University of Minnesota research associate in epidemiology. When young people find it harder to buy liquor, not only do they drink less, they provide less alcohol to others, Toomey said. And scores of studies on curbing the supply of alcohol — including raising the drinking age to 21 and raising liquor taxes — document cuts in traffic crashes, teen suicides and liver cirrhosis.

The problem, according to the liquor industry, is that these crackdowns are aimed at commercial sellers, while the evidence shows that youngsters' main source of alcohol is "social" — older friends or family, or just some guy in the liquor-store parking lot.

"If a parent isn't going to take this seriously, or a cousin or a brother or a sister, my question is, what can government do?" said Jim Farrell, executive director of the Minnesota Licensed Beverage Association.

Nevertheless, the Minnesota Legislature is considering other enforcement actions in its big crime bill. One would require legal penalties not just for the clerk or server who sells alcohol to a minor but also, for the first time, for the owner of the establishment. Another would make money available to communities that want to begin or expand their compliance checks.

Health advocates have even more public-policy enforcement ideas. They include:

- Requiring buyers of beer kegs to register at liquor stores. That makes it possible to track and penalize adults who then serve the beer to youngsters. In St.

Cloud now, individual keg customers have to first get a \$4 city permit, which puts them on record as buying the keg. And in Minneapolis at least one liquor store, Zipp's, has decided to register all keg buyers voluntarily. "It's good protection for us," said owner Mickey Schoenzeit.

- Curtailing home deliveries of alcohol. Like some restaurants, some liquor stores deliver, and research shows that young people count on delivery people being less inclined than store clerks to check IDs.

- Restricting alcohol sponsorship. Brewers are second only to the tobacco industry in sponsoring activities such as sports events. Communities could limit the kinds of events alcohol companies can sponsor — Little League games, youth days or car races, for example — as well as any promotional materials at events, such as banners, T-shirts and caps.

A brush with reality

Also showing promise are programs that manage to correct students' hugely inflated estimations of their friends' and classmates' drinking habits, a correction that leads them to ratchet back their own drinking.

"Although we like to think otherwise, we are mostly conformists," said Wesley Perkins, a sociologist in New York who recognized this connection. And that's a problem when surveys show that young people typically overestimate everyone else's drinking by two to three times. It sets up a spiral where some teens drink heavily because they believe everyone else is.

"Students are essentially fooling each other," Perkins said.

To stop the fooling, some colleges conduct student surveys to measure true alcohol consumption. Then student health centers advertise the results in posters and campus newspapers.

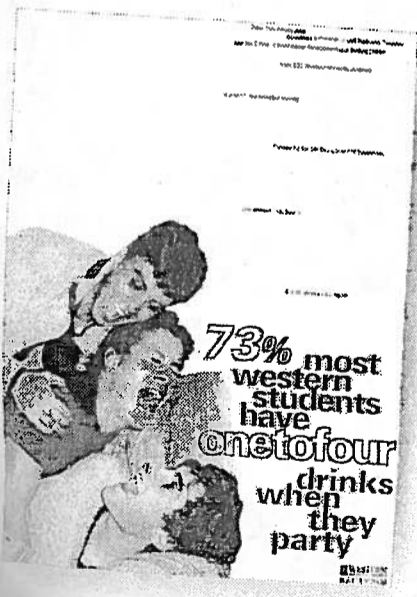
Colleges that have applied Perkins' theory have cut students' alcohol consumption by as much as one-fourth in one year. At Western Washington University in Bellingham, for example, the binge-drinking rate dropped from 35 percent to 27 percent the first year of its program.

The approach has its critics. The biggest complaint is that colleges seem happy to announce that, say, 20 percent instead of 40 percent of its 18-year-old freshmen drink every weekend when, in fact, *any* drinking at that age is illegal.

"The patterns are not what we'd find ideal," Perkins said.

But back at Western Washington University, Pat Fabiano, a health director there, still is encouraged by the numbers. For example, when asked their perception of their classmates' drinking habits — how many drink at least once a week, for example — the students dropped their estimate from 90 percent to the more-realistic 50 percent.

"So we know we're having an effect," she said.



Posters such as this one are working to change perceptions on campus about how much college students really drink. Some schools say the efforts are reducing rates of binge drinking; critics say that *any* drinking by underage students is illegal.

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